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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of a productive collaboration between university instructors who linked the principles and theories in reading methods coursework with the practical field experience of preservice teachers. The objectives of the collaboration were: to counter the effects of the isolation of theoretical premises of reading instruction from practical experience; to better meet the needs of students in their field experiences; and to create an environment for fostering developmental changes in students. The research explored: (1) how students' awareness of reading events in the field experience classroom affected their attempts to deal instructionally with those events; (2) whether students' classroom instructional activities reflected their epistemological beliefs; and (3) if modifications to the program improved students' pedagogical thinking about reading and reading instruction. Students' awareness of reading events, stimulated by journal writing, did affect their planning and implementation of instruction but did not raise their levels of reflectivity. To develop higher levels of thinking in teacher education students, programs need to provide students opportunities to struggle with problems in a supportive atmosphere. Teacher educators may enhance the opportunity for increased cognitive development by confronting students with dilemmas which create moderate disequilibrium. (IAH)

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Classroom to classroom:
Restructuring to meet field experience needs

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Abstract

This paper describes the results of a productive collaboration between university instructors who linked the principles and theories in reading methods coursework with the practical field experience of preservice teachers. The collaboration attempted to counter the effects of the isolation of theoretical premises of reading instruction from practical experience, to better meet the needs of students in their field experiences, and to create an environment for fostering developmental changes in students. The researchers explored (1) how students' awareness of reading events in the field experience classroom affected their attempts to deal instructionally with those events, (2) whether students' classroom instructional activities reflected their epistemological beliefs, and (3) if modifications to the program improved students' pedagogical thinking about reading and reading instruction. Students' awareness of reading events, stimulated by journal writing, did affect their planning and implementation of instruction but did not raise their levels of reflectivity. To develop higher levels of thinking in teacher education students, programs need to provide students opportunities to struggle with problems in a supportive atmosphere. Teacher educators may enhance the opportunity for increased cognitive development by confronting students with dilemmas which create moderate disequilibrium.

Classroom to classroom:
Restructuring to meet field experience needs

To mesh theory and practice in a teacher education program requires integration, internal restructuring, and continuity within and among preservice methodology coursework and field experiences. Although the Holmes Group (1986) found that "rarely does the [practice teaching] experience build upon the general principles and theories emphasized in earlier university study" (p. 54), the purpose of this presentation is to describe the results of a productive collaboration between university instructors which linked the principles and theories in the reading methods coursework with the practical field experience of preservice teachers. The collaboration was undertaken in an attempt (1) to counter the effects of the isolation of theoretical premises of reading instruction from practical experience, (2) to better meet the needs of students in their field experiences, and (3) to create an environment fostering developmental changes in the ways in which students build new constructs regarding the nature of knowledge.

The long-range goals of this study were threefold: first, to explore the relationship between students' awareness of reading events in the field experience classroom and their attempts to deal instructionally with the various constraints of those events; secondly, to discover whether students' classroom instructional behavior patterns reflect their epistemological beliefs, and, finally, to improve students' pedagogical thinking about reading and reading instruction.

Conduct of the study

The participants in this study were the reading methods instructor, the field supervisor, and the teacher education students enrolled in a reading

methods course or field experience practica. At this midwestern university, methods coursework and field experiences do not occur concurrently and may not follow in immediate succession.

Because the purpose of this study was to change a program, data collection and its results led to programmatic change. These changes formed a dialectical relationship, that is, data on student behaviors informed the change process, and the change process in turn effected new or variant student behaviors.

Data that informed the change process included students' journals, in depth interviews with students eliciting their perceptions of the focused journal writing and its effect on their attention to reading events, observations of students' teaching, and seminar discussions.

Two types of student journals were included in this study. Content journals were written at the beginning of most methods class sessions. In these journals students responded to a variety of questions related to their assigned readings and focused on particular reading concepts.

During field experience, journal content related in particular to reading events which the students had observed or with which they had interacted in their practicum classroom. Students described the event itself, elaborated upon the classroom context, analyzed the event and its effects, and reflected on the event from their own personal, practical theories. Practical theories represent conceptual structures that teachers use to justify their choices of action and curriculum materials (Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986). The basis of practical theories is practical knowledge composed of empirical, value and situational experiences. Reflection on actions taken based on practical knowledge increases practical knowledge.

The field experience journals were collected weekly, read and commented upon by one or both of the researchers, then returned to the students. The nature of the comments was to encourage reflection at deeper levels by posing questions which were at least one level beyond the original entries. Copies of the journals were made and kept for analysis. The journals' contents and the researchers' comments were analyzed and coded on the basis of modified levels of reflection (Smith & Pape, 1990).

Field notes of observations of the student teachers were made on a biweekly schedule throughout the semester. The same coding system of modified levels of reflection was used to analyze the field notes. Informal feedback during student teaching seminar discussions was also considered in looking at possible changes.

Results

Students' awareness of reading events was reflected in their journal entries and interview protocols. That awareness did affect their attention to reading events during planning for and implementation of instruction in some students (Smith & Pape, 1990).

An analysis of the data from students in their spring 1990 field experience practicum suggested that the students' levels of reflectivity did not show marked changes despite attempts to effect change through the journal writing (Smith & Pape, 1990). Students did not consistently respond at only one level; however, the modal level of reflection for these students was Level 4, indicating that they are typical of the individuals in studies reported by Kitchener and King (1990) for college juniors and seniors. Further, patterns of student behaviors which were observed and analyzed reflected the students' journal ratings. For those students for whom Reflective Judgment scores were available, this pattern remained consistent.

An analysis of the results related to the first two goals of this long-range study necessarily lead to a consideration of the third goal, i.e., the improvement of students' pedagogical thinking about reading and reading instruction. As a result of these findings, the first modifications which were effected within the methods coursework were designed to increase students' reflectivity about the reading process and their implementation of that process as prospective teachers. For example, one of the changes encouraged the development and use of appropriate terminology regarding reading theory during writing assignments and group discussion in both the methods coursework and field experience. Future modifications are dependent upon the results obtained from each succeeding group of student teachers.

Discussion

The changes noted in this data toward increased reflectivity, although minimal, corroborated results reported in other studies of reflective judgment, notably Knefflekamp (1974). In light of the developmental aspects of this model of reflection, one semester is not enough time for observable changes to occur.

Secondary education majors had not taken any reading methods instruction and had difficulty determining what constituted a reading event. Although several secondary majors used practices which could be identified in the theoretical literature, such as establishing prior knowledge, none consciously applied reading theory to his/her planning and implementation of instruction nor used appropriate terminology to discuss events when they did attempt to write about them. The secondary majors did not recognize certain aspects of their instruction as being involved in reading events or the importance of these practices for their instruction.

All elementary or special education majors had taken reading instruction from the same reading methods instructor. The time lapse between their

reading methods coursework and student teaching varied from one semester to two years. These students identified reading events and supplied appropriate terminology frequently when describing the events. However, within this group, the strategic application of reading theory was inconsistent. Several students depended unquestioningly on the models provided by the cooperating teacher in terms of lesson structure and content. A few other student teachers were able to consciously plan and implement instruction from the theoretical grounding learned in coursework. These students, however, exhibited flexibility and creativity in meeting pupils' needs only when the constraints imposed by the cooperating teacher, the context of the classroom, or the lack of appropriate resources were lifted. For example, Zoe was delighted when her school experienced a severe paper shortage and the cooperating teacher turned to her for direction in planning reading activities that did not require dittos. "The problem for me was trying to be creative, teaching reading without a deluge of dittos, and yet getting it done in the time slot you have."

Zoe's efforts represented one student's attempt to adapt theoretical concepts to practice. Helen, on the other hand, did not attempt to implement practices in the classroom that were not modeled by her teacher. Her efforts were confined to journal entries in which she used reading theory to analyze the instructional routines she had observed.

Marcella and her cooperating teacher held conflicting views of appropriate classroom practices, including such managerial issues as whether students should be allowed out of their seats, how loud was too loud, and how neat work areas were to be kept. For example, the cooperating teacher criticized Marcella's handling of a reading group because the children became "too loud" during a story discussion. Despite being the weakest student teacher, Marcella took advantage of the cooperating teacher's extended

absence to practice some of the instructional strategies she had learned during reading methodology coursework.

An analysis of the data from the Spring 1990 field experience students led the researchers to contemplate changes which could be made in the reading methods coursework and hence contribute to meeting the objectives of this long range study. Given our epistemological base, these changes need to lead our students in the Teacher Education Program to the kinds of understandings which look beyond whether an answer or methodology is right or wrong, to a perspective which questions its value for the larger instructional context. Course content journal assignments, which previously had included just the instruction, "React to (a given journal article or text chapter)," were now constructed with directives specifically aimed at the theoretical focus of the article or text portion and the students' reaction to that. For example, early in the fall semester of 1990, students were asked to describe the classroom benefits of each of two differing instructional philosophies and then to indicate from a teaching perspective why one appealed to them more than the other. After the writing event, the preservice teachers were given the opportunity to talk with a peer about their thinking, now written, and that conversation was followed by a whole class discussion related to the theoretical focus being considered. Greater specificity helped students focus their thinking on the theoretical aspects of the assigned readings and the related implications about reading and reading instruction for the classroom where they anticipate teaching.

To aid further this connection of theory to practice, the field experience coordinator reinforced this activity the following semester during seminars and class discussion by using terminology directly from the reading methods coursework. She reactivated the theoretical knowledge students had acquired

during methods coursework by guiding discussion on specific cases taken from students' journals or her own observational records made on site.

The articulation between persons dealing with the field experience practica and with the university coursework was not difficult to achieve. Both instructors were interested in improving teaching practices of prospective and practicing teachers. Both had had taught reading in regular public school classrooms as well as in remedial classes for children and illiterate adults. One had received her doctorate in reading education and had developed the present elementary reading methods courses at this university, while the other had focused her doctoral studies in the areas of curriculum theory and teacher education. Although one instructor spent most time in the field site thirty-six miles from campus while the other was on campus, sharing a common "home base" in the same department at the university facilitated their joint efforts considerably. Further, delegating particular responsibilities related to the conduct of this study and frequent communication reduced confusion and redundancy of effort.

Implications

Preservice teachers' abilities to identify reading events as well as to allow their reading instruction to be guided by appropriate, substantiated theory appear to vary with the instructional schema of each individual. The students' responses to constraints, including the time lapse experienced between theoretical coursework and the student teaching practicum, the style and routines of the cooperating teacher, the context of the classroom, and the lack of appropriate resources, varied also. Dealing with those anticipated variances in both methodology coursework and the field experience practicum is imperative. If a purpose of teacher education programs is to provide students with learning situations where they can actively seek to solve problems, those programs must

provide opportunities for students to struggle with problems in an atmosphere of support. The continuing collaboration in this study, with results effecting change which in turn affect practice, is one manner of implementing this provision.

If there is a predictable relationship between instructional patterns (not single instructional acts) and a student's epistemological stance, then teacher educators may need to create purposefully the sort of environment most conducive for each student's development toward a more relativistic position. For example, there is some indication that perturbation is required for cognitive development, and that that development is uneven across domains (Perry, 1981). Therefore, instructors who would enhance the opportunity for increased cognitive development will use practices which create moderate disequilibrium. They will confront students with dilemmas, case studies or protocols from real classrooms, probe, puzzle and provoke questions about meaningful issues which provide natural challenges to a student's assumptions, and they will allow time for interaction. They will contradict the text, the authorities, the known theory and ask students for examples of contradictions they may know.

The advisability of encouraging prospective teachers toward more relativistic thinking may need to be questioned, however, if the school districts where these prospective teachers will be employed maintain an ethos where administrators, teachers, pupils and the community adhere to unquestioned standards and rules, including curriculum choices and methods of instruction. It is probable that relativistic student teachers and beginning teachers will experience difficulty adapting in those contexts.

If we do want our teachers to develop higher levels of thinking among their pupils, and there is evidence to suggest that this is a necessary thrust of the curriculum (Goodlad, 1980), then the teacher education program will need to provide those experiences leading to higher cognitive development among

prospective teachers. "We want students to become good thinkers because thinking is at the heart of what it means to be human; to fail to develop one's potential in this regard is to preclude the full expression of one's humanity" (Nickerson, 1987, 32).

On the other hand, since divergent viewpoints within schools do not seem to be desired or rewarded (see Goodlad, 1980), Level 4 thinking as observed in our sample may be the ideal for prospective teachers. This, indeed, presents a problem for educators who espouse a position which would lead them to encourage prospective teachers toward higher levels of reflection, a premise of our particular Teacher Education Program.

The improvement of students' pedagogical thinking about reading and reading instruction, in terms of this study, has not yet been reflected in the practice of our student teachers. We believe this change has not had enough time to occur. Further research is needed to ascertain whether the continuing modifications being made in methodology coursework, practicum seminar discussions, and supervisory conferences related to classroom observations will effect the desired changes.

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